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Parfois Le Hasard Fait Bien Les Choses: The Biography of Justus Rosenberg

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Parfois le hasard fait bien les choses: A Life of Justus Rosenberg

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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You give but little when you give of your possessions.

It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.

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Preface

The reverberations of the attack at Notre Dame, when an Algerian student assaulted a police officer with a hammer on June 6th 2017, silenced the always lively center of Paris. *La Rive Gauche*, the southern bank of the Seine where the city is partitioned in two, was desolate. The French *Tricolore* was plastered across patrolling police vehicles. Dwindling numbers of pedestrians, choosing to withdraw rather than resurface on either side of the Seine, questioned whether the *Gendarmerie* had the situation under control. Wearing an unexceptional hooded sweatshirt, black trousers and sunglasses with circular frames, I sought refuge in Shakespeare and Company, a bookstore opened by George Whitman in 1951; however, this was not the birthplace of the noted *librairie*.

Sylvia Beach, who published Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1922, had founded the store's first location on Rue Dupuytren, in the Odeon district of the 6th arrondissement. An American bookseller from New York City, she arrived in Paris, strapped with three thousand dollars, like Varian Fry in Marseille, and took advantage of the exchange rate coupled with the strength of U.S currency to start a bookstore. Beach eventually visited Whitman's shop, named after her store, declaring it the 'successor' to the original.

When I walked through the doors, I was greeted by the redolence of the aging wooden shelves that housed an array of spines, old and new, waiting to be read. A tall, slender figure greeted me with a name-tag on her shirt upon which the word *tumbleweed* was inscribed.

I asked, "Why tumbleweed?"

She tilted her head sideways and looked at the floor momentarily, unable to contain a smile across her face. I learned that Whitman, the proprietor of this location, who had been the

first self-proclaimed “tumbleweed,” blowing from place to place while sheltered by the kindness of strangers, allowed anyone to work in his store on three conditions. They were required to read a book every day; to help out in the shop for a few hours each day; and to write a single-page autobiography for his archives. Today, the bookstore has housed more than 30,000 Tumbleweeds.

“You should go upstairs” prompted the young woman, who was studying French literature at the Sorbonne. I obliged.

As I walked up the winding staircase, scarcely able to swing my arms owing to the narrowness of this ascending corridor, I got within earshot of a fast-moving, squeaky voice.

“A poem must be embodied,” uttered an old woman, as she missed the cup, while pouring tea for another Tumbleweed. Framed by the cloudless Parisian sky, she was a portrait in flux, refusing to be a “once upon a time poem.” Pan Melys still hosts the Mad Hatter’s tea party every Sunday between four to six, a fact that she would repeat with as much periodicity as she would remind all to have a cup of tea.

“Give it space!” she cried to each aspiring poet. With each ‘Voila!’ she proclaimed, the poets, through her presence, were moved from repose to realization.

Before each recitation, she demanded that each speaker state their purpose.

“Why are you here in Paris?” she inquired, twisting her torso and head in a single motion, her face resembling the crinkles of paper squeezed by a frustrated fist.

“I am retracing the steps of my biographical subject, from Danzig to Paris, through Grenoble and Marseille, off to the Pyrenees and then back to Valence.” I replied, looking beyond her at the still motionless sky, ensuring that the chronology of Rosenberg’s passage during the war mirrored my journey.

“Where are you off to next?” she asked immediately.

“Barcelona. My bus to Spain, via Grenoble, leaves in an hour.” I answered.

“Well, what are you waiting for! You are on the right track!” she yelled.

I picked up my notebook and left the room, thinking to myself: “Am I?”

*

We often think linearity is easy to understand. Linearity is the property of a mathematical relationship or function, that is to say, that it can be graphically represented as a straight line. If we hope to facilitate the transition, for a reader, from a lack of information about a biographical subject to familiarity with this subject, then a straight road is preferable. Curves are misleading.

Education is often treated in such a linear manner. The objective is to take, not guide, a student from ignorance to understanding via the shortest route. The biographer does not simply render the subject onto the page, but rather *teaches* the subject to the reader.

To write a biography, as I learned, and continue to learn, during this journey, one must understand the distinction between a *road* and a *path*. A road is defined by its boundaries and is oriented towards a destination. You are on-road or off-road, there is no in-between. A path is a path by virtue of the feet that walk upon it. Multi-directional movement is possible in one moment. People walk on paths. There are various paths that serve as the bridge between the reader and the biographical subject. Each narrative is but one of an infinity of paths. As biographers, we must remember W.B. Yeats:

Had I the heaven's embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light;
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

Let us not tread on the subjects' dreams, but walk alongside them on their path to
somewhere, nowhere.

Had Dr. Johnson written his own life, in conformity with the opinion which he has given, that every man's life may be best written by himself; had he employed in the preservation of his own history, that clearness of narration and elegance of language in which he has embalmed so many eminent persons, the world would probably have had the most perfect example of biography that was ever exhibited. But although he at different times, in a desultory manner, committed to writing many particulars of the progress of his mind and fortunes, he never had persevering diligence enough to form them into a regular composition. Of these memorials a few have been preserved; but the greater part was consigned by him to the flames.

- James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 1791

Parfois le hasard fait bien les choses

Professor Justus Rosenberg arrived five minutes before class began. He placed his walking stick in the recycling bin, pulled out a chair with some difficulty, and sat down exhaling from the effort of climbing two flights of stairs. A light blue cap, spectacles and an ochre jacket. The first words to come out of his mouth, I suppose, nobody could have predicted: “*Ungezeifer!*” The students stared. “*Ungezeifer*” he repeated. I opened my copy of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, flipping through the pages, wandering from sentence to sentence. I returned to the opening page. Professor Rosenberg, having noticed, without forewarning, said: “Go ahead.” I obliged:

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.

“Exactly, you see - these translations, they betray us.” The puzzled expressions, punctuated by murmurs of doubt, only served to enthuse Professor Rosenberg.

Ungezeifer, Kafka’s term for his description of Gregor Samsa at the beginning of the *Metamorphosis*, cannot be translated successfully. *Ungezeifer* denotes a filthy creature that is unfit for sacrifice. “Monstrous vermin, Gigantic insect, bugs – they betray us and yet” looking at us with his reassuring smile, he declared, “we must continue.”

His class, titled *Different Voices, Different Views*, which he has taught, and continues to teach, each year of the 21st century hitherto, moves through the problems of translation by studying English versions of Kafka; the language and rhetoric of colonial oppression through the writings of Charles Mungoshi and Nadine Gordimer, whom he invited to this class several years

ago; and the critical tension between Islamic jurisprudence and the rights of women filtered through the novelistic prose of Nawal El Saadawi.

*

“We are going to read novels. I would like to bring up the five principles of analysis. If you look at a work of art, be it a poem, short story or play, there are certain considerations that will allow you to perform analysis. If your roommate, for instance, has been to a movie, what is the first question you ask? “What was it about?” In other words, you ask them for a summary of the story, right? A fancy word is the plot. I would like you to develop the ability to use simple words as you analyze, with precise and specific insertions of critical terms. Now, the plot inevitably reveals the setting. When and where does the story occur? We must ask ourselves these questions, it is very important. What follows the plot and setting? Who is involved? Character is the fancy word. The next thing is the theme, you see. We have the plot, time and place, characters and theme. The last one is the most difficult, usually a misnomer, tossed around by the scholars falsely. They say the style. I don’t like that word. The word I prefer is artistry. I know many of you are interested in music. Why do you recognize Beethoven? I am often embarrassed when someone asks me who is that composer and I say that it is Mozart but I do not know why I feel the language of the sound. The building blocks of the piece of music or literature are language. How does the novelist create this feeling? The artistry.”

*

Professor Rosenberg, over the next two months, revealed, in retrospect, the Johnsonian lack of a persevering diligence to form writing into a regular composition; however, the greater part of his several attempts at putting his life into writing were, as opposed to being consigned to the flames of the unknown, placed in the hands of a fledgling and nonplussed sophomore.

A few weeks into my first class with Professor Rosenberg, we were assigned Borges' short story, "A Garden of Forking Paths." Professor Rosenberg focused on one passage for the greater part of the session:

The Garden of Forking Paths is an enormous riddle, parable, whose theme is time. To omit a word, to resort to inept metaphors and obvious periphrases, is perhaps the most emphatic way of stressing it. That is the tortuous method preferred, in each of the meanderings of his indefatigable novel. The Garden of Forking Paths is an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe. The writer believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times. The network of times, which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware for one another for centuries, embracing all possibilities of time. We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist, and not I; in others I and not you; in others both of us.

The class had dispersed. Professor Rosenberg had asked me to stay behind. Having spent a few weeks in his class, I had observed his habit, conducted with a consistent inconsistency, of asking questions pertaining to a students' upbringing and the languages they were able to speak fluently. As a polyglot, he often departed the classroom speaking Mandarin, Russian or German with a student who shared a language with him; however, as a speaker of Hindi and Marathi, I

thought that this seemed an unlikely outcome. As I stood up, slipping my arms into my jacket, he rapped the base of the chair on his side. Sitting next to him, I waited for any indication of an opening statement. His characteristic volubility seemed muted. I opened my mouth, now at a loss to what I had planned to say, as I was left utterly inarticulate by his stupefying question.

“Will you write my biography?” asked Professor Rosenberg.

In this labyrinth, I had reached the forked path and my decision to embark on this journey of writing his life has impressed upon me the gravitas of not only writing but also processing this “indefatigable novel,” where each sentence, clause, punctuation mark engenders the Sartrean *anguish* that I have both the freedom and responsibility to choose; nevertheless, in contrast to the question: “how do you choose a biographical subject?” – it is clear, in this case, that it was not the subject that was chosen but the biographer.

*

Rosenberg opened his eyes and looked at the bare ceiling. Patches of the wall resisted the splotches of paint bleeding across the surface like spilt tea on white sheets. The crevices had widened. Fleas, marching in formation, routinely invaded this dilapidated and neglected room, beneath the rafters, in the Hotel *Paladie Bel Air* in Marseille which was his temporary home. The pigeons perched on the window were his only visitors. He would later recall looking out onto Rue de Madagascar on 25th July in 1941, the day he arrived, hoping that he would soon be on one of the idle boats rocked by the gentle sway of the waves before they set off for North America. The bulb dangling from the electric cord flickered, the light receding and expanding in and out of existence.

Fry expected him at the office no later than 9 o'clock. It would quite possibly be the last time they would meet. Rosenberg could not shut his eyes. Sleep evaded him. He looked at his lean athletic thighs, fatigued from the trek along "Fittko Road" in the Pyrenees where he had recently guided Heinrich Mann and Franz Werfel along with their wives across the border from France to Spain. It had been a year of working as a courier for Fry's Emergency Rescue Committee, delivering messages, intercepting communications across enemy lines and escorting the chosen intellectuals to Spain. Davenport, who affectionately nicknamed him 'Gussie' because of the resemblance he shared with her younger brother, connected Rosenberg to Fry knowing that he would be useful. His shimmering blonde curls, blue eyes and his slight but strong build allowed him to pass as German. His thoroughly Aryan appearance was his first line of defense.

The years in Danzig, during which Rosenberg secretly picked up Yiddish by staying up to listen to his parents diagnose their predicament after the burning of Jewish shops in the neighborhood, revealed to him his ability to acquire languages. His schooling, in a German-

speaking kindergarten and grade school, accustomed him to the nuances of the enemy's tongue. Finally, his years at the Sorbonne, cut short by the outbreak of war, had gifted him with fluent French bereft of any detectable accent. The *maquisards* sought shelter in the forest; he took refuge in his mastery of languages.

Rosenberg remembered his initial excitement as a courier delivering letters to the intellectual elite in Vichy France during 1941. That feeling slowly dissipated as lying there longing for rest, he realized the day of Fry's departure was drawing closer and closer.

*

"Let us take a simple poem for instance" said Professor Rosenberg. The students in his class, eyes transfixed on the diminutive figure whose walking stick was always curiously placed in the recycling bin when he entered, waited for him to begin:

"Let me just give you an example. It is very difficult to translate poetry. Impossible. I have refused to teach poetry in translation. It is no longer poetry. Let me quote something in English and you try to translate that into French or German or Russian.

Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed,
the dear repose for limbs with travel tired,
but then begins a journey in my head,
to work my mind, when body's work expired

“It is a sonnet by Shakespeare. It’s a nice poem but try to translate it so that it sounds like music, so it comes together. What does it mean? I haste me to my bed. I am damn tired, of course! The bed is what? The dear repose, you understand, for limbs with travel tired but then begins the journey in my head, a journey in my mind you see. We all have that right? But now comes the kicker you see.

For then my thoughts from where I abide

Intend a zealous pilgrimage to thee

“What does that mean? A zealous pilgrimage, a wonderful way of expressing your thoughts about your beloved or something which you desire.”

*

The thundering of a passing ambulance startled the young Rosenberg awake. The minatory siren always gave him the *chaire de poule*. The breeze from the *Vieux-Port* carried with it the various tongues of the people in transit throughout the city. Rosenberg lifted his leaden legs and stared listlessly at the hopeless tap that was always dry. He walked to the window and peeked outside. The violent and theatrical exchanges of exiled anti-fascist Italians; the romantic musings of deracinated couples about their new life in America; and the hopeful artists unaware that their privileged route of escape, through Fry’s operation, was to disappear from view by the end of the month. Marseille had become the crossroads between resistance and escape. The anguish precipitated by the realization that one must choose either to confront or evade the

oppressor troubled many minds. Rosenberg stayed on but he desired distance – distance from danger, from possible death, from the sufferings of others.

He never failed to notice the *Taverne Charley* on his way to Fry's office, unaware that Simone De Beauvoir, teaching at the Lycée Montgrand in Marseille at the time, was composing chapters of the *Second Sex* that first appeared in *Les Temps modernes* at the end of the war, in the small brewery he walked by so often throughout 1941. The next left brought him to Boulevard Garibaldi as Fry's office had to move from Rue Grignan to keep the Vichy Government guessing.

With a wave of his hand he ushered the boy, who had only turned twenty that year, into his office. The well-groomed Fry always reminded Rosenberg of a British University don, presumably because of his affinity for bow ties. This time he was sitting at a mahogany desk wearing spectacles perched on his nose, burrowing into a pile of papers; nonetheless, he had looked dapper. The office itself was so bare that it would undoubtedly dispel any notion that it might be the headquarters of the Emergency Rescue Committee. Fry glanced up from his papers with a slightly distracted look suggesting that he was composing his thoughts when he saw Rosenberg.

Fry spoke briefly. His face, as Rosenberg recounts it today, told the entire story: "Fry had been asked to leave France. The Vichy Government had lost patience with him as his enthusiasm to get people out often involved illegal means".

"The United States was not as yet involved in the war, right?" I asked Professor Rosenberg at his home in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York.

"Correct. The United States of America at that time still maintained diplomatic relationships with Germany *as well as* Vichy France. Later on, I realized, the Vichy Government,

after the armistice was signed with Germany, had been allowed to keep the French fleet.” This French fleet, as Professor Rosenberg remembers it, was anchored, for the most part, in the military harbor in Toulon. “It was a powerful fleet but now it was neutralized,” Rosenberg recalls. “They had sent an admiral as ambassador from America, you see, to make sure the Vichy Government would not turn over the fleet to the Germans. Fry’s activities were eroding the relationship the Americans were trying to maintain with the Vichy administration. I remember Fry’s passport was about to expire and the American Consulate refused to renew it until he returned to the States. They sent a Vichy police inspector to escort Fry by train to the Spanish border. Contrary to claims that he was in real danger, he had lunch with the inspector and his departure was uneventful.”

In this last conversation in Marseille, Fry did not go into detail but he did offer Rosenberg the opportunity to sleep on the army cot in the kitchen to the office after he had left. Rosenberg had already noticed the curiously placed cot. The office would remain unused following Fry’s departure, so Rosenberg gladly accepted, relieved to have spent his last night in the flea-infested confines of the janitor’s quarters in the *Paladie Bel Air*. Nevertheless, Rosenberg knew this could not have been all that Fry was trying to tell him. There had been a sense of urgency the day before in his request to meet. Yet now, face to face, Fry said nothing. Rosenberg understood what that meant. Soon, he was to be on his own.

Within weeks of Fry's departure, Rosenberg flatly refused to sleep ever again on the cot in Fry's kitchen. The *paperasserie* in the graphite-tinted cabinets which had been filling Rosenberg's days disclosed a fearsome secret. He had been oscillating between reading, attempting to satisfy his insatiable appetite, which devoured the comprehensive character profiles of those who made it onto Fry's list, and his bouts of nostalgia for the days blissfully lost in the labyrinths of Mallarmé at the Sorbonne. There the *joie de vivre* had been, for Rosenberg, in the art of conversation with his debonair professors arguing about translation as a transmigration of souls; the dainty ingénues all too easily impressed by his poetic monologues; and the Wednesday evenings at the *L'odéon* theatre where the reduced rate for students allowed him to watch Molière and Corneille.

"Dating was very different as there were no girls in school but my classmates had sisters," mentioned Professor Rosenberg with an impish chuckle.

"But, why did you refuse to sleep on the cot?" I asked, hoping to steer this dialogue back on course.

"A man died of a heart attack and was immediately placed on it" replied Professor Rosenberg.

The man in question, a lawyer who defended Jews persecuted by the Nazis in Munich, went by his underground moniker 'Appel'. As this man was speaking to Fry, clarifying his urgent need for information on the whereabouts of the intelligence networks of the French Resistance in Lyon, he collapsed. His body was placed on the cot as they tried to revive him. Rosenberg, who found a letter, in the *paperasserie* that Fry left behind, documenting the incident in such stark detail that it left him positively ill, trudged through the description to the crucial

concluding paragraph, written by Fry himself. “The Alsatian would have been useful to him,” Rosenberg now reflected. This man’s name, as he would never forget, was Jean Gemähling.

“If you have a problem, reach out to me” Gemähling had said to Rosenberg, nevertheless slipping from the grasp of the young Rosenberg’s memory long before he became the head of intelligence for the *Mouvement de libération nationale* headquartered in Lyon. Gemähling had assumed this position after spending 1940-1941, like Rosenberg, working as part of Fry’s operation. Still, as his memory rarely betrayed him, Rosenberg remembered Gemähling’s address in Lyon. He placed Fry’s letter on the cot and stared at it. Gemähling had always made clear his desire to have the young Danzig-born polyglot as a member of the French underground. The forked path demanded a choice, to join or plot escape. Rosenberg’s eyes implored the page, resting on the sepulchral cot, to speak, to give him an answer. “Should I write him?” said Professor Rosenberg, revisiting the decisive moment. A week later, he received a pale envelope with a bus ticket to Grenoble and a piece of loose parchment with the words: *étudiantes universitaires. vous devez attendre pour Damour.*¹

¹ University students. You must wait for Damour.

Grenoble was deceptively placid. The Alpine peaks, which had witnessed the war with dispassionate eyes, were the only visual respite to the congested streets overrun by unfeeling tanks and throngs of the impoverished. Gemähling was clever. He always made it a point to remind Rosenberg that recruitment would be “your forte”. Through compulsory enlistment for the German war machine, the *Service du travail obligatoire*, signed and enforced by the Vichy government, required all able-bodied men and single women to compensate for the dearth of manpower caused by Nazi losses on the Eastern Front through forced labor for the German war effort. Gemähling, who carefully maintained a written correspondence with Rosenberg, underscored the need to galvanize the students at the *Université Grenoble* so as to undermine the Vichy administration’s cooperation with the Nazis. Rosenberg, in the few weeks he was able to spend at the *Université*, interacted with students whose subsequent involvement allowed Gemähling to teach the politically naïve youth how to effectively falsify documentation, ranging from medical records to the storied *carte d’identité*, in order to circumvent this period of forced deportation. Rosenberg covered his tracks, followed the instructions and switched to German with a nonchalance that he thought would keep him safe. And it did – until March 24th in 1942. Rosenberg was housed by Madame Damour, a widow in a quiet neighborhood tucked away in the suburbs of Grenoble during the spring of 1942. Her benign but firm manner pleased her tenants from whom she always maintained a decorous distance. With Rosenberg, however, she would regularly display a tone of seemingly incongruous curiosity about his day. These momentary exchanges, performed with meticulous regularity, always calmed Rosenberg. His seemingly indefatigable mind, having been worn down by the inordinate vigilance to which he had become inured, relished these instances of normality and repose.

Each morning, Rosenberg would shower, dress and jot down his schedule for the day. The house itself, at a distance from the city center, had no visitors. The floorboards creaked discordantly with each step as he walked down to the kitchen rehearsing the salutation with which he would greet the idle figure of Madame Damour. This tête-à-tête was his signal to leave the domestic cloister and remember his purpose. Before he reached the bottom of the stairs, he realized that his left jacket pocket did not house his list. This was an unusual error. Rosenberg walked back upstairs and, upon entering his room, saw the list resting where he had left it on his cot. As he picked it up, there was a knock on the door. Knuckles on the door tapped thrice, spacing each strike with the uniform intervals and measured pressure of official force, the homogeneity of sound marching through the hollow halls, up the squeaking staircase and, like a sterilized dagger, piercing deep into his heart. Again, three knocks. Rosenberg stood erect, his mind retracing every single step of the last seven months in one implosive moment. He heard the rattle of someone grasping a loose doorknob. Boots pounded up the silent staircase and systematically thudded through each room. Rosenberg, frozen to the spot, did not move. Three Vichy policemen charged into the room and arrested him. Rosenberg did not resist. The process was horrifying in its procedural exactitude. One policeman covered Rosenberg's head with a coarse cloth that exuded the noisome vapors of dried blood. Two officers attached themselves to his body, like appendages caused by a genetic mutation, and led him down the stairs. Madame Damour, with a vehemence that he had not known she could have mustered, declared: "*Il est un homme très gentil et jeune.*"² His legs felt heavy. The officers had to drag him across the ground, not because he resisted, but because, as he remembers today, "*cela peut être la fin.*"³

² He is a very kind and young man.

³ This may be the end.

*

“How would you define the term ‘novel’?” asked Professor Rosenberg. The momentary silence was his cue.

“I mean, it seems so easy, people say novel, but what is it? A novel is a type of writing or literature and you know when a novel is a novel but what distinguishes it as a novel?”

“Fiction?” mumbled a diffident young man, looking at Professor Rosenberg’s sympathetic face.

“One often confuses fiction and narrative. But let us think of a novel from a purely physical point of view. How many of you have seen a nineteenth century novel in its physical form, not on the computer, but in your hands? It is big and fat and people don’t like to read novels anymore because they are so big. So, the novel is a type of literature, that is to say it belongs to a particular genre. How many of you have heard the word *genre*? Good, you understand. The novel belongs to a particular genre. Are there other literary genres? Give me another one!”

“Short stories” declared a disheveled girl clutching a copy of Camus’ *The Stranger* in her hands.

“Short stories of course! What else?”

“Biographies?” ventured a lanky fellow in a Paris Saint-Germain jersey.

“Yes,” acknowledged Professor Rosenberg, glancing at me with his impish grin.

“Some people like Biographies but there are other genres, the novella for example. What is another genre? Poetry, of course! What about another one? Plays, of

course! It is very interesting that people often, just to give you an example, think that somebody who is a great writer should excel in all genres; however, there are very few very great writers who tried to excel and succeeded in multiple genres. Let me give you an example. Shakespeare, known for his poetry and his plays right? Then there is Goethe, a German who wrote short stories, novels, plays, wonderful poetry and scientific papers as well. He lived long enough to do that. He was born in 1742, I think, whatever. The other one was a Russian, which Russian? Pushkin wrote plays, short stories, novels, everything. The Shakespeare of Russia, mostly known for his poetry, created the modern Russian language. Different genres exist and you cannot just dump it all in one heap. So now, having understood a little bit about genre, we are going to deal with novels of the nineteenth century. Now, here is a requirement. I would like you to keep informal journals where you enter notes on passages that strike you in the novel, images that are striking, literary devices that are being used – don't tell me "oh that was very interesting," I don't accept that word – why? It doesn't say anything. I want to know why is it interesting. We do that in personal terms. I eat something or watch something or meet someone and I found it or them very 'interesting'. I call that a weasel word. What is a weasel? A weasel is an animal which is trying to get out of something. I remember I was interested in plays. I was interested in a twentieth-century playwright, Bertolt Brecht who wrote very controversial plays. He wrote a kind of literature that I refer to as a 'committed' literature. This is writing that is trying to make and sell a political point. He was influenced by Marxism and he was performed all over the world despite his political motives. I used to amuse myself by going to the first performance of Brecht in the U.S.A, in the Soviet Union, and during intermission, I would sneak up to a couple and try to do

what? To listen to them, of course! One would say invariably: “How did you like it? “What do you make of it?” “I liked it very much” – bullshit that doesn’t say anything. People want to show off and not admit how stupid they are. “It was very interesting.” So, they used that weasel word. As a matter of fact, whether it was the Soviet Union, France or Germany - the public was the same. They do not ask why. When you write a critical paper, do not give me the stuff you pick up from somewhere. Bring something of yourself to the paper. Always ask, why is it interesting?”

*

Rosenberg felt movement through the judders of the bus as it charged towards a detention camp, unknown to him at the time, outside of Lyon. Shards of light cut through the blacked out windows. He couldn’t see a thing but curiosity pulsed through him. The faceless bodies around him, with their heads bowed towards the ground, were stiff as if fear itself had shackled them to their inexorable fate. Upon arrival, they were distributed into barracks, each with the same number of inhabitants and with a uniform ratio of men and women within each structure. The barracks, like the guards, expressed severe austerity. They had been stripped naked and supplied with uniforms. Their bodies now upholstered the loose straw beds, if one could call them that, on which they slept. The murmurings of discontent that spread within the camp were met, not with brute force, but with impenetrable indifference. The inmates were permitted to roam the grounds during the day. Rosenberg was distressed to the point of exasperation by the constant susurrations of complaints by the inmates. Although he empathized with their discontent, he had to wade through their tragic narratives as he desperately sought information, not consolation.

The curfew was at sundown. This meant being trapped in the barracks that you were assigned to and, more importantly, staying there through the night. The congestion of bodies made it hard to breathe. Sweat congealed with the chaff that clung to the unwashed skin of each body. Rosenberg had soon had enough. The oppressive humidity forced him to sneak out of the barracks, left unmanned by the guard, and lie down in a patch of soft grass a few feet away from the entrance. He surrendered to fatigue, stretching his arms to relieve his aching back. Rosenberg, who was asleep within seconds, finally left this world if only momentarily. A vicious kick to his ribs left the guard's boot lodged in his torso. His body reflexively withdrew into the fetal position and he coughed uncontrollably as the air rushed out of his lungs. He opened his eyes only to squeeze them shut. The malicious flashlight focused on his retinas.

“Le couvre-feu n’a pas été levé, imbécile! Que crois tu faire?”⁴ came the peremptory question.

Rosenberg was desolate but the palliative French syllables gave him some solace. He did not expect to hear French, with the influx of several German officers at midday, and the guard did not expect an answer in French as most people at the camp were escapees from Germany seized by the Vichy police.

“Je suis désolé. Je ne me sentais pas bien. Alors, je ne pouvais pas rester là-bas”⁵ replied Rosenberg, with a stumbling staccato as he regained his breath.

The guard's leg cocked to deliver a second blow, then stopped in mid-air. “Pourquoi es-tu ici?”⁶ asked the guard, in a softer tone, apparently puzzling over the fact that the response was superior, in its construction and articulation, than mere passable French.

⁴ The curfew has not been lifted, fool! What do you think you're doing?

⁵ I'm sorry. I did not feel well so I could not stay there.

⁶ Why are you here?

“Juif?”⁷ suggested Rosenberg, unsure of why he was arrested but vigilant so as to not divulge more than was required to propel the exchange further.

“Mais tu parles couramment le français. Je ne comprends pas.”⁸

Rosenberg, seeing an opening, relayed, not his time in Marseille working for Fry or his year working for the French Underground, but rather his journey to France. He was, he explained, essentially orphaned as a boy, sixteen at the time, with his parents sending him from Danzig to Paris as the Nazis inched closer towards their shop. The Nazis had ravaged the Jewish-owned shops in his neighborhood. “It was only a matter of time” insisted Rosenberg’s mother. It was an “evil wind that would pass,” thought Rosenberg’s father, who had refused to believe that a country that produced Goethe could willingly let the Nazis consolidate power and rule.

Rosenberg, as he retold his story, realized that he sorely missed his parents and younger sister, Lilian. Their whereabouts would remain a mystery to him for the next decade. The guard, visibly affected by both the storyteller and the story told, steadily retracted. Rosenberg, who took this as a tacit sign for him to rise, emphatically implored, “S’il te plaît, dis-moi pourquoi je suis là. Que va-t-il m’arriver? À nous?”⁹

The guard explained the confluence of circumstances within which Rosenberg found himself ensnared. Once the capacity of the camp reached 1200, they would be sent to a labor camp in Poland. By the next evening, as the guard intimated, the fateful number of Jews would be met. The guard did not clarify Rosenberg’s situation. It was clear that the information game was being played on both sides. Further prompting was futile. The guard led Rosenberg to the

⁷ Jew?

⁸ But you speak French fluently. I do not understand.

⁹ Please tell me why I am here. What will happen to me? To us?

barracks and parted with, “ne t’inquiète pas pour ton sort,”¹⁰ leaving Rosenberg to wonder, “si je ne le fais pas, alors qui?”¹¹

¹⁰ Do not worry about your fate.

¹¹ If I don't do it, who will?

The campgrounds were swirling with whorls of half-broken conversations; plots were woven in concentric circles around the personal histories of each member of this society. Rosenberg remained at the periphery as he moved through its permeable boundary, concentrating on absorbing the layout, faces and rumors of the camp, before seamlessly distancing himself from the instinct to purge the fears of tomorrow by sharing his history with others. The Vichy guards patrolled every point of escape. It was clear that since he could not find an exit, Rosenberg had to create one.

Every camp had an infirmary. In this case, the largest barracks was designated for this purpose. The Vichy officials, in accordance with the Geneva convention that stipulated a prohibition on killing wounded or sick prisoners of war, would restore the health of any detainees before sending them to labor and extermination camps. Rosenberg knew, having eavesdropped on a practicing doctor appalled by the paucity of medically trained staff in the camp, that the only conditions for which an ailing prisoner would be sent outside of the camps barbed-wire fences were those requiring surgery. Gemähling had told him, "If you are in a sticky situation, fake insanity or feign the symptoms of a condition that would require you to be cut open." Rosenberg concentrated, pacing back and forth near his barracks. His eyes glimpsed the faces around him, strangers with an ineluctable fate.

A young girl sitting on a stack of wooden planks near the line for the infirmary arrested his gaze. Her erect spine and dour expression arrested him. Rosenberg remembered her clinical responses to his cajolery, which had unmasked the fact that he himself had been unsure as to the true motives of his conscious decisions at that time. As a medical student studying in Paris, she had often accompanied her brother, who was Rosenberg's friend, to their soirées near the Sorbonne. Rosenberg sauntered towards her and asked, not to her incredulity for her coquettish

grin showed that she had recognized him from a distance, “What is a fatal disease that is not too bad?” She replied promptly, “appendicitis.”

Rosenberg turned this surreptitious exchange into a lesson on the symptoms of appendicitis. The condition itself was not considered to be dangerous but the region of the body, if infected, required an immediate operation. The appearance of symptoms began by a clutching of the abdomen punctuated by prolonged moans of anguish. The equipoise between credibility and a jejune overplay of the affliction required thoughtful restraint. At this point, Rosenberg persuaded the spellbound girl, whose veneer of composure dissolved under his spontaneous tutelage, to run into the infirmary the moment his apparent abdominal spasms had forced him to lie down on the grass. This solitary spot, where the guard had roughed him up the night before, soon attracted a ring of anxious bystanders directing further attention to the severity of his case. The nurses in the infirmary, having been disturbed by the sporadic vomiting concomitant with the condition and thereby convinced by Rosenberg’s thespian talents, transferred him to an empty bed in the barracks for an immediate examination. He had circumvented the seemingly endless queue as he was stretchered to his room.

“You will to have a high temperature” his scrupulous accomplice had shared during their laying of the groundwork for this performance. Rosenberg, by his habitual telepathy, had already figured that out.

Earlier that day, Rosenberg had obtained useful information. He had distributed his attention proportionately across every conversation, diffuse or detailed, that he absorbed during his meanderings through the threads of oral history retold in the camp. These currents of storytelling mingled with exchanges about the details of their new environment. A patient, cured

by the nurses in the infirmary, had feverishly explained the design of each cubicle to a plainly incurious audience, concerned more about the type of soup to be served at the next meal.

Now, as Rosenberg rested on his cot in the infirmary, the nurse had entered, without warning, and placed a thermometer in his mouth. Rosenberg remembered his halcyon days in German grade school when he routinely put matches under the bulb of the thermometer, placed in every classroom, to increase the level of mercury. The teacher, having glanced at the manipulated instrument, had cancelled class because of the artificially high temperature created by his exquisite quick-wittedness. He did not have matches in the infirmary; however, he needed friction, not fire. Rubbing the thermometer with such vigor that he closed his eyes at the unbearable thought of breaking the fine glass tube, when he did open them again he saw that the mercury level had risen to the point where he should have been dead. He then so desperately blew on the bulb that the frail springs of his cot whimpered as his body bounced up and down.

The male nurse entered again a few moments later. Rosenberg feigned a peaceful countenance akin to the times his mother had entered his room on school nights beyond a rigorously enforced bedtime. He sensed the male nurse's measured movements as the latter circled the rickety bedframe. His heart pulsated through his body. The wind gusted through the empty room, opening the window. Suddenly, the nurse was nowhere to be seen. A blanket of comfort descended upon him, swaddling his worries with warm reassurance. He was at ease with this moment and let his body surrender to gravity.

The nurse silently glided back into his room, and pricked his right arm with an injection. Rosenberg, unguarded and suddenly petrified, was anesthetized and, to his dismay, out of control. The words of the Nurse, "The deeper you breathe, the less you will feel" were, he thought then, his epitaph that would have perished, with him, on the operating table.

“The narcosis was fading,” he remembered many years later. The presence of a haunting silence, uninterrupted by the empty streets at midnight, jolted Rosenberg into consciousness. His arms and legs, tied to the hospital bed, were heavy with drowsiness. His eyes remained closed.

“They removed my appendix. I still wonder to this day,” he recounted to me, so many years since it occurred. “When the doctor operated on me, did they know that it was fake and did not care?” wondered Professor Rosenberg.

The vibrations inside his abdomen inside echoed with unforgiving pain.

“Qui es-tu?”¹²

Rosenberg, petrified by the once palliative French syllables, glanced up towards the faintly discernible figure. The pain ceased. There was a new nurse, this time a woman, sitting on a chair next to his bed. She rested her interlaced hands on her lap.

“Pourquoi suis-je lié?”¹³ protested Rosenberg, who kept trying to move.

“Vous avez essayé de fuir la nuit. Donc, nous vous avons lié”¹⁴ answered the nurse, whose expression of maternal concern at the sight of the young man, prompted Rosenberg to continue probing her for information.

“Savez-vous ce qui va m’arriver?”¹⁵ he asked. She opened her mouth as if about to speak but said nothing. She looked at him. He inhaled, preparing to repeat himself. She answered, speaking in an audible whisper, “Lorsque vos points de suture seront retirés, nous devons vous renvoyer au camp. Tu as une semaine.”¹⁶

Rosenberg was left to the by now familiar task of devising an escape plan.

¹² Who are you?

¹³ Why am I tied?

¹⁴ You tried to run away at night. So, we tied you.

¹⁵ Do you know what will happen to me?

¹⁶ When your stitches are removed, we will have to send you back to the camp. You have one week.

The next day, sensing that the nurse had given him a warning, and recognizing that, in his currently weak state, he was doomed, Rosenberg realized that he desperately needed an ally.

“S’il vous plaît pouvez-vous faire quelque chose pour moi? Je voudrais que vous m’apportiez du papier et une enveloppe.”

The nurse, who, it seemed to Rosenberg, was visibly moved by affection for the patient, complied. Rosenberg then wrote the following to Gemähling’s address in Lyon: “Ce serait bien de me rendre visite.” This ostensibly innocent phrase was an unambiguous signpost, in cipher, alerting the Resistance headquarters to his whereabouts.

“She helped me in two ways” recalled Professor Rosenberg, leaning toward me with his arms and legs now unfettered, watching the strokes of my pencil trying to keep up with the pace of his narrative. “She must have not only posted the letter but also taken it to the address.” I didn’t follow. He, recognizing my inability to stitch the narrative threads as quickly as I needed to, continued the story with rehearsed precision and an impish grin.

“Two days later, I got a visit from a priest. Priests were part of the underground army, the religious arm in Lyon. They saved people. Why priests? Don’t you wonder? Priests, you see, were the only people allowed to see prisoners or incarcerated individuals. Gemähling had mentioned that the priest, whether you were a man of God or not, can be your savior.”

“The priest, I presume, was alone when he visited you?” I inquired.

Professor Rosenberg, whose spectacles nodded along with his wrinkled complexion, continued:

“The design was exquisite. The priest, once in my room, proposed the following.”

Professor Rosenberg arched his back, like the curve of a question mark, maintaining that posture

throughout his dramatic retelling of the priest's instruction, and then enacted, along with the appropriate change in the tone of his voice, the priests' thorough explanation.

“In two days, I will return. I will be back, here. I will be outside this ward and in the bathroom, I will leave a small package.” Professor Rosenberg interrupted himself: “The priest spoke very slowly as if he only wanted to outline the plan once.”

“This package has a few shirts and shorts, a pair of sandals and a number of pens. I will come to the hospital by bicycle and leave it near the main building. Tomorrow, around three o'clock, when they have visiting hours, I want you to get out of bed, take off your nightgown and walk downstairs.”

“Your stitches would not have been taken out by then, Professor?” I interposed, forcing myself to disrupt the lesson of his life story with questions.

Professor Rosenberg acknowledged this observation with a nod and continued: “When you reach the exit of the building, find the bike. Get on it and start pedaling to this address in Lyon.”

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“Why were plays so important?” asked Professor Rosenberg. His students, in anticipation of his next linguistic perambulation, cued him with their silence.

“They are performable, right? What does that mean? It is a question of money, of course! A play could reach a lot of people. To create art in print was impossible. Why? What did one need to print? You couldn't. The only solution, at the time, were manuscripts. What is a manuscript? *Mano* means hand and *Scriptore* means written by. If

you desired to write something and have it published, you couldn't. It had to be written down by somebody. I do not want to disappoint all of you but contrary to popular opinion, democracy didn't start in Greece. Although people often say everyone could read and write there, that is baloney, not true. One out of a thousand knew how to read and write. In Greece, however, plays had a distinct purpose, an educational purpose. A play was, in essence, trying to demonstrate something. For instance, how many of you have read the Oresteia? The story of Agamemnon. He was one of the Kings who united with the others and led a military expedition. Where did he go? The town of Troy. Where is Troy? Turkey, at the entrance to the Bosphorus. Why did he attack them? Well, one of the princes of Troy visited one of the Greek princes and took off with one of his wives. The woman in question: Helen of Troy with the face that launched a thousand ships. Agamemnon, in his attempt to avenge her, attacks Troy. The weather is lousy. The ships had to cross the Mediterranean. I sailed across that sea once. So what does Agamemnon do? They were a people of faith and the weather was determined by the gods. They were polytheistic. Agamemnon prays to the god of the ocean but you don't just pray to gods. Praying is cheap, right? He sacrifices his own daughter, Iphigenia to the goddess, Artemis. The Trojan War lasts for about ten years. Following his victory, Agamemnon returns home to his wife, Clytemnestra. She had been having a dalliance with Aegisthus, her husband's cousin, while he was away at war. By the way, Agamemnon was screwing around and still demanded that his wife be faithful. Clytemnestra rolls out the red carpet when her husband returns. Why did people roll out the red carpet? We still do it today at film festivals. Why red? Have you ever asked yourself that question? That's the way it is, people will say. You see, the roads were dirty. Therefore, the carpet allowed

Agamemnon, with his cleaned footwear, to enter the palace. Why red? This is what I want you to do, the ‘why’ is most important. Red is the color of lifeblood, you see, the color of life.”

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The young Rosenberg, still weak from the surgery, refused to surrender to sleep. He wondered whether the enervate slightness of his famished form would be able to support his weight until he reached the room’s exit, let alone to the bicycle left by the priest. The policy in the ward, which prohibited patients with stitches from leaving their bed, was yet another institutional barrier. A standing patient suggested the ability to move freely; movement, like paper, was dangerous.

Sleep was time wasted. Rosenberg devised a supplementary plan, during the night, without which the package in the bathroom, the bicycle and Lyon would be useless. Still in bed, he kept his eyes fixed on the slit between the door of his room and the floor. With the passage of each shadow, his eyes immediately shifted to the door knob. He was waiting for his ally, his only chance of escape.

When she arrived, Rosenberg, without warning, asked the nurse to let him use the bathroom. The nurse picked up the bath pants, as they were called, and handed them to the young man.

“Puis-je aller à salle de bains.”¹⁷

No answer.

¹⁷ Can I go to the bathroom?

“Maintenant.”¹⁸

She offered him the wearable *toilette* again.

“Mais, la vérité, j’ai besoin de chier.”¹⁹

She looked at him, silent.

“I would never speak to a woman in such a way, but what else was I to do?” I thought Professor Rosenberg would clarify but he didn’t.

The ward doctor was the only authority that could sanction the young Rosenberg’s need to use the bathroom. The nurse left in search of the doctor. Once again left to his thoughts, he remembered his parents, receding into the backdrop as his train left the station in Danzig for Paris in 1937, when he was only sixteen. Time often felt dislocated by the need of constant vigilance. He, I imagine, lingered in that image, remembering his mother slip money into his pocket and his father, but a few minutes later, doing the same. Each parent had told him to refrain from telling the other about this valedictory gesture of care. He was, in essence, orphaned on that day. Rosenberg had learned safety from his home life; he learned resistance on his own. His feeling of entrapment in the present engendered misgivings about the cyclic nature of escape and recapture.

A few hours later, the nurse returned. She loosened the restraints on Rosenberg’s arms and legs but did not set him free herself. The drapes were drawn shut and the door of the bathroom, on the opposite end of his bed, was left ajar. She was punctilious in providing him with these gestures of goodwill. Rosenberg remained motionless, registering the subtleties of her quiet rebellion. Her economy of motion suggested that either she was acting without the doctor’s approval or she was performing with meticulous haste as she surmised, not the intricacies of his

¹⁸ Now.

¹⁹ But the truth is, I need to shit.

plan, but rather his intentions to flee. She exited the room, without looking back at him, and closed the door with an uncharacteristic thud.

The residual sound of the closed door had not dissipated as Rosenberg tensed his legs to turn himself on his side. That proved too difficult. He persisted. With each attempt, he grew increasingly restless. His arms and legs, attenuated by the lack of movement, gave up on him. Kafka instructed his publisher that Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of the *Metamorphosis*, was not to be drawn or even seen from a distance. Rosenberg, like an overturned arthropod, was not able to turn his body onto his side. He noticed the loosened restraints attached to the bed frame and recognized that he needed to increase the leverage in order to get on his feet. He gracefully pointed his toes and bent his knees, performing an amateurish plié that set his legs free. His elbows, relatively unscathed from his long period of immobility, held up his torso. His head, leaden with sleep, required strenuous effort to keep upright. His right hand, grasping tightly at the loosened shackle, turned the bed frame into a lever. Rosenberg's other hand slipped from the tether as his body squirmed into a seated position. His feet unfolded onto the floor, part by part, stimulating sensation from the sole to the thighs. He flexed and relaxed his legs, watching his quadriceps emerge during flexion and disappear during the release of tension. He began to walk with knees that buckled under the strain of his body weight. With each step, the internal adjustments of his body, with arms raised above his sides and feet placed firmly on the floor, enabled his balance. He repeated this painstaking journey between his bed and the bathroom for several hours. He chose to sleep that evening, with, possibly, his last day ahead hoping to execute a patently preposterous escape plan.

Having practiced his walk, Rosenberg waited till the beginning of visiting hours before he opened the room door. The corridor was filled with lively chatter that, in the late afternoon,

was gradually fading to odd murmurs. He cut a diagonal through the corridor to the bathroom, punctuating his strides with occasional looks both behind his shoulders and on either side of the walkway. He did not pause to breathe. The package, in the spot where the priest had promised he would find it, contained shirts, shorts and pens. Having changed into the achromatic street clothes, with much difficulty, he scuttled to the staircase and walked through the exit. The pace of his escape left him astonished.

A bicycle, in the distance, was visible. Rosenberg, ignoring the unbearable pain flowing from his abdomen, began peddling. He left the hospital grounds unnoticed. The wide road ahead, empty and surprisingly unmanned by any patrolling vehicles on either side, eased his abdominal pain. Within the first hundred meters, having left the vicinity of the hospital, he looked and noticed a line of blood dripping from his leg. His stitches were tearing. He held his sutured wound and rode the bicycle with one hand. His lines were not straight but he was moving forward towards Lyon. He was going to make it.

He was approaching an adjacent street shaded by protective and thick verdure. At the pace he was peddling, he had a minute until he was out of sight. The roar of sirens shattered his balance. He looked back to find two vehicles, an ambulance and a fire-truck, racing towards him. The repetitive screech of each siren sent shockwaves through his system. The approaching flashes of red and blue hurtled towards his defenseless two-wheeled getaway conveyance.

“They are coming for me,” thought Rosenberg, sentencing himself to a self-evident fate. He did not stop moving. The hemorrhaging from his unknotted stitches failed to deter him. He braced himself for gunfire, choosing to shut his eyes as the rumble of the engine invaded his lane. Within seconds, the noises faded. He opened his eyes to find the vehicles not only uninterested in him but they were gone. He denied himself solace until he exited the main street.

He stopped his bicycle, hand still pressed against his leaking incision, so as to orient himself towards the safe house of the Resistance.

Complacency was forbidden. Discolored indigo mats, lined in rows with fastidious care, tiled the floor. At the end of the first band of rectangles, there was a stack of several mats. Rosenberg had found his bed. The French Underground had chosen this unremarkable structure, an abandoned gymnasium, as a storehouse for medical supplies. His stitches were removed by the doctors stationed at the safe house. He exhaled, softening his tense body into gradually unknotting repose.

Gemähling had been engaged with Intelligence operations but his whereabouts remained unknown to the young Rosenberg, only twenty-one in 1942. He was given false papers, a practice that the Underground army had fine-tuned to near perfection. His new home, forty miles away from Lyon, situated in the uncomfortably tranquil countryside, was run by a widowed peasant. She was a maid but served in the religious arm of the Underground. A devout protestant too, she repeatedly reminded him. Rosenberg, as the papers designated, was her nephew.

Jean-Paul Guiton Sayn grew up in Saint-Malo, a port-city in Brittany flanking the English Channel coastline of northwestern France. He was born in 1927, making him six years younger than Rosenberg; however, his fair complexion and his inexplicably boyish essence allowed for this variation in the age between the man and his assumed identity. His birthplace was chosen because Saint-Malo, which was a large city, was a French military naval town. When the Germans had taken over this town, they had their submarine fleet stationed there as it was close to the Atlantic Ocean. The British, aware of this move, bombed the town. This demolition not only destroyed the submarines but also the town hall that housed the birth certificates of the surrounding population. Rosenberg's identity, as Jean-Paul, was unassailable.

“Keep in mind, he made this interesting remark. Brecht said: “I feel something when I have a toothache.” In other words, he makes fun of feeling, the dependence on feeling. “When I write, I think.” Do you understand what he is trying to say? It is really an intellectual process. I must confess something to you. When you love somebody you should admit it. He is one of my favorite writers. You may ask why as you may not like him. We can discuss that later. He often asked, what is the purpose of a writer? What function does the writer have? To satisfy himself? Well, many writers do that, sadly. But what function does the writer have? Does he have any function? Someone once said, “the writer is the engineer of the soul.” What does that mean? You engineer something that you make. In other words, let me give you two words: a writer should not only be descriptive but also prescriptive. Most writers are descriptive. That is why you have all these love stories, you know the same thing. It is descriptive, you understand? Some argue that writers should also be prescriptive. The writer is the engineer of the soul. I think about it everyday when I watch the crap on T.V. There you have, sad to say, nothing but description. Shooting and love. There is nothing that is really prescriptive, which could educate people. We are in desperate need of education.”

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Memorization was vital to survival; however, in such a confluence of circumstances, attempting to persuade members of the Resistance to commit to their *renaissance*, as it were, by committing the story of their newfound character to memory, was straightforward. Rosenberg, as Jean-Paul, was told that the elderly woman, with whom he would stay, was his aunt. His mother

lived elsewhere. His father, who was a French officer, died in the war in 1941. The Germans revered people who died for their country, even if the deceased were a Frenchman. Rosenberg's make-believe mother, when playing Jean-Paul, was Alsatian. This seemingly minor detail accounted for the slightest accent within Rosenberg's French that could be justified as an inheritance from his Mother's ancestry. The artistry with which these narratives were crafted rendered him virtually untraceable.

His first assignment tasked him with a job for which he was tailor-made. As a young, blonde polyglot, he was given a forged license that permitted him to sell items; he was a traveling salesman.

"I sold what we call the red pages, the telephone book." Professor Rosenberg clarified, always ensuring that any gaps in my knowledge were attended to.

The system involved three steps: learning, perspiration and reportage. Considering the German preoccupation with an array of insignias of units, Rosenberg was taught a lesson in these exceedingly complex and intricate designs. His ability to vividly recall images from memory after only a few instances of exposure, with high precision, was central to his role. He was, if unmasked, always a student.

The merchants, with whom Rosenberg, as a salesman, did business, required a specified volume of books to be sold each month. He surpassed their expectations, securing transactions across the region. Breadth of exploration, not depth, was optimal. Rosenberg, relentless in his desire to satisfy his clients, eased into his position, weaponizing his charm in order to choose, rather than be assigned, his forthcoming locations for new sales, a privilege readily granted to him. His industry was born out of the need to continue living, to sustain his buoyancy.

In the meanwhile, when shuttling between households and offices, he attended to his real objective. By hanging around cafes on the coastline, listening to German soldiers and analyzing the insignias on their uniforms, he reported to the Underground Army. With orbital regularity, he returned to the post office box in the city of Valence to supply his information.

“This information was passed on by radio to London. Why London? You see, De Gaulle was organizing a French army in London. Radio messages were encoded. The Germans realized this and they established special cars with antennae to detect the location from where the radio messages were being emitted, to pick up the people sending the messages.”

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Professor Rosenberg, soon to be ninety-six at the time of our discussion, clasped onto the sides of his chair, straining to keep himself upright. I had learned his unspoken gestures of exhaustion, always prepared to pause our ongoing dialogue. To distinguish between the parts of his narrative, silence was vital. He did the talking and I did the listening. Our conversations were asymmetric, and deliberately so, occasioning moments of, for my subject, embarrassing fatigue. He missed his youth, having been robbed of adolescence. Sitting at his kitchen table, a few feet from the Professor, the lessons of his life began to unfold. The motivation for his choice of profession, given his quick intelligence and his facility with languages, was entirely logical. It played to his natural strengths. His attitude towards life, by contrast, was not; having encountered fear and death, he had formed an unrelenting determination to delight in living. He took with a grain of salt the pretensions, ambitions and the rhetoric of people who never faced

the existential danger he did. He needed encouragement to be more forthcoming about his life, holding onto his shapeshifting self.

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In late 1943, the Underground Army assigned Rosenberg to a guerrilla group. These clusters of vagabond rebels, brought together owing to their shared inexperience with firearms, of all types, were tasked with disrupting enemy combatants. They were a heterogenous, ragtag bunch, who had found their way to the Underground through the Pyrenees, the Alps or the Mainland. The mountainous regions of the Alps and in Limousin were plainly inaccessible by tank. As lethal agents, unable to be seen behind the vegetative smokescreen, they were tasked with blowing up the German supply lines for that was all they could possibly do. Considering their size and strength, any other mission would be suicidal.

“Guerrilla, a spanish word,” Professor Rosenberg paused to clarify, interrupting himself, “is derived from *Guerra*, which means war, and *illa*, which is the diminutive in Spanish for little.”

Rosenberg’s group, like all others, were explicitly instructed never to engage the enemy directly. The devising of strategy, as the groups of fighters were scattered across the region, was accompanied by the diurnal rhythms of everyday life. Time was partitioned between paramilitary tactics and, for Rosenberg, books. The paucity of reading material often irked him.

When stationed near the outskirts of Lyon, Rosenberg persuaded a few of the members to explore a derelict warehouse, situated several hundred feet from their makeshift encampment. The initial hesitance from many within the group stemmed from their awareness that this warehouse was not only monitored by the Germans but also visited sporadically in order to gather materials from the supply depot. The murmurings of doubt caused the few willing members to desert Rosenberg. He grew impatient and decided to embark upon this excursion by himself, as he had become accustomed to acting alone.

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“What is the purpose of the chorus? They comment on the play. Here is Brecht, in the 20th century, using a *controlled* chorus in *The Measures Taken*. A controlled chorus is political. What is a controlled chorus? What associations do you make with the word control? Control is politics. Keep in mind, political organizations have an ideology. You go around and try to spread your political ideas. You can be a socialist, from the left or the right; a christian; a democratic socialist or a national socialist. These political parties, I kid you not, exist in the world. People who are committed to an ideology hope to spread it. What is the purpose of a political party? The United States is a bad example of this. You are not a democratic or a republican. You may vote for them but you are not a member of the party. There are some people who are members of the parties. How many of you are members of a political party? Do any of you pay dues to the party or merely vote? Americans are not members to a party, only voters, if at all. A member of a party is committed at all times to the ideology. A well organized party has a control committee. In our Senate we have several committees. Nobody knows why they exist and what functions they should fulfill. It is interesting how ignorant we are, politically speaking. What is the purpose of a committee? A committee looks into a particular problem. They are reporters. In political parties, instead of a controlled chorus, we have control committees.”

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The path to the warehouse was straightforward. A narrow road, with some portions wider than the rest of it, like a nervously chewed pencil, separated him and potential disaster. His regular observation of the structure, and the vehicles which visited it, suggested that there were patrolling vehicles that performed one visit every alternate day. The oddity, he realized, of this scenario was that these vehicles, with blacked out windows, could have carried at least twenty people during each visit. Rosenberg considered the possibility of a firefight between this German unit and his group, taking solace from their ability to retreat behind their natural fortress, deep into the shrublands of southeastern France.

Fridays, he recorded, were conspicuously avoided from this speculated pattern, with either Saturday or Sunday serving as the first day in the pattern for the following week. The officers were always obscured by the fact that their vehicles were parked behind the warehouse. Rosenberg, having chosen a Friday for his personal mission, decided it was time to act.

He studied the misshapen road and located the narrowest portion that would minimize the time unprotected by his terrain. To be visible in plain sight was irresponsible. He remembered his mother, as he approached the path, forever reminding him to look to either side when crossing a street. Although he had often found such recommendation infantilizing, even if he was only five at the time, he longed for her solicitous suggestions. He crossed this road on his own.

He approached the warehouse, oscillating as his feet moved forward and his head constantly looked back over his shoulders. He hugged the sides of the structure, occasionally glancing at the unmanicured patches of shrubbery surrounded by deracinated trees. When he reached the other side of the building, a barely visible metal handle projected from the surface. A soft, indistinct sound of a voice, speaking at a distance from him, seized his attention. The

thickness of the walls belied the time he thought he had to depart. The door handle slowly turned, but Rosenberg had already planned for such an occurrence.

He refused to look back until the voices faded into the merciless flatness. He had noticed a shielded garbage receptacle, fortunately empty, left unattended near the warehouse. The miasma of near-capture was slowly receding as he looked back towards his encampment. Patience, as a guerrilla fighter, is a matter of introspection. The mind, violently thrashed around within this ebb and flow of uncertainty, latches onto pictures of stability. If left to a human being, of fragile constitution, it is the mind, not the body, that forces the rebel to confront his mortality.

Rosenberg had noticed an inkblot of a house in the distance. He wondered whether this was a figment of his dehydration. He decided, against his better judgment, to walk around the bend, behind a cavalcade of bent fences, strewn across the ground like a poignant imitation of Dali's *La persistència de la memòria*, to find a school house. A triptych, adjoined to form a horseshoe shaped facade, had an open door at its center. As a one-storey building, its lack of height presumably aided its survival. He rushed into the door and startled a young man, walking in the hallway. The spectacled male, whose French revealed, to Rosenberg, his provenance, instinctively denied accusations that had not been made.

“Je ne suis pas un collaborateur,”²⁰ he vehemently declared.

Rosenberg shed his inscrutable countenance, and smiled at the pitiable man, whose body vibrated tremulously.

“Livres,”²¹ said Rosenberg, with a firmness that, although feigned, maintained the intensity of force required so as to control the situation.

²⁰ I am not a collaborator.

²¹ Books.

He was directed to a small room, with a dilapidated bookshelf, left untouched behind a row of stacked chairs in the dusty corner of this library. In his bedroom in Danzig, Rosenberg stepped into the world of his books listening to his father's footsteps. Late in the afternoon, his father was pacing, in those days when the Nazi grip over Europe tightened, never free from worry. The neglected four shelves, with only two books in them, perhaps reminiscent of the view of Weidengasse and the immaculately maintained football field he spent hours looking at from the window in his room, produced an unexpected pause. The veneer of composure was cracking. The young man, he had noticed, had begun to scrutinize his uniform in search of a badge. Rosenberg hurriedly picked up both books. He then announced, as if to an audience, that these books are confiscated. As he returned to his encampment, unable to even catch a glimpse of the covers of the two books, now in his possession, the sky remained quiet, waiting for the revelation. A "Beginning Russian" language manual along with a pocket Russian dictionary were his treasures. His days of cleaning guns and playing cards, mind-numbing when repeated indefinitely, were now displaced by learning Russian and stepping into another world, if only temporarily, of his creation.

The Guerrilla groups were tasked with disrupting railway lines. The lifeblood of the German defenses, built on the Mediterranean coast, a few months after the fall of *Il Duce* in the Spring of 1943, was circulated by the diesel-powered trains or on the highways. Each supply line nourished enemy contingents, sustaining the forces for a few weeks, at most. The need for constant motion, through the locomotive vessels without which the Germans could not fortify the coastline, prompted a sense of urgency within Rosenberg's outfit. With no experience, he would find himself on the train tracks the night he had received his next assignment, once again faced with a steep learning curve.

To find the road, Rosenberg had to embrace his blindness. The densely clouded sky, blanketing the stars, left the group of loosely bound men in dark stillness. Moving in lines, linked by the sounds of footsteps, they slalomed in between patches of untrimmed grasses and open spaces, where the wind buffeted against their exposed bodies. The interminable length of the journey was compounded by the inability to look beyond the shadowy forms, his faceless allies. By loosening the bolts on the tracks, with repurposed carpentry tools, the task itself was uncomplicated. "Now, listen," ordered a disembodied voice, "the Germans will search the area tomorrow. Leave nothing behind. Tomorrow, the highways." His heart, I imagine, yearned to lie motionless for a moment, suspending the inexorable cycles of cause and effect. His muscles searched for elusive repose. The dust upholstered his unshaven face. Rosenberg, in times of exhaustion, lingered with the image of the seductive flesh of a baguette, deliciously supple, flanked by a knife and pearls of soft margarine and a rich, ink-blotted cylinder of specked salami paired with a light red wine, redolent of the carefree evenings near the Seine.

The plan to interrupt the flow of enemy rations, via the highway, was intricate and iterative. Rosenberg, assigned to lead the task force through this operation, decided to go down

from the mountains before midday. His sleep, chronically deformed by his indefatigable mind, provided ample time to fill the lacunae in his design. They departed in a truck, the only vehicle fit for escape in the case of a firefight. The low-lying vegetation, inconsistently lining the highway, without any discernible pattern, could not protect the truck from detection. The engine, weary from the staccato starts and stops during their activities, forced the guerrillas to disembark near the road. The trees, dotted in isolated clumps, shrouded the truck. The keys were left in the ignition for fear of a motor meltdown. The invisibility of twenty guerrillas was difficult to secure. Rosenberg stationed every member, separated by ten meters, along the road. The string of crouched shapes waited vigilantly for the convoy. Having woken up at four in the morning, as his comrades rested, Rosenberg remained near the road, logging any vehicular activity. He stationed one of the only members of his outfit experienced with guns to provide cover if they were overrun. In his head, the plan was only a matter of execution, without revision.

The suspense marked by the absence of any motion or sound, barring the listless flurries of breeze to which Rosenberg acclimatized himself as quickly as taxi passengers attune themselves to the rhythm of fast-walkers on the streets of a modern city, escalated the suspense. At the sight of a convoy, each guerrilla, armed with a single grenade, was ordered to lob it towards the moving target. As soon as the grenade left his palm, each fighter was instructed to find the shortest route to the truck, covered by another guerrilla manning the single machine gun fastened to its rear. The Germans, as Rosenberg had surmised, unfamiliar with the terrain and presumably unsure in their response, would provide adequate time for each member to safely return to the group's encampment. Although the convoy had not as yet arrived, his imagined simulation of the chain of events, unfolding successfully in his mind, had calmed his nerves.

A curious and unusual humming emerged from the steady silence. Rosenberg shuffled to the edge of his vantage point, as the last member in the row of guerrillas turned grenadiers, halting before he exited the enclosure of the favorably tall, dessicated grass. The man, whose spine was uncomfortably straight, grasped tightly around the two handlebars of the droning motor vehicle. Short-cropped hair, unapologetically blond, and a hairless complexion emblazoned with the vicious Aryan gaze left Rosenberg utterly disconcerted. The Germans had sent a decoy.

His head remained forward facing but the unmistakable glances aimed at each guerilla, now practically naked in the face of the German decoy, exposed Rosenberg's plot. His veneer of composure, I imagine, must have cracked. The Germans had adapted, and those who failed to adapt, perished; however, Rosenberg recognized the value of longevity, not sheer lunacy. It was 1944. Although he withdrew his outfit of which he had taken command, he did not admit defeat. The supply line may not have been interrupted but could nevertheless be redirected. The motorcycle carried on. The guerrillas, trusting in Rosenberg's rewriting of the script, detonated their remaining stores of ammunition, in the form of grenades, to create an insurmountable roadblock when the highway crossed over a steadily flowing tributary that led to nowhere.

On June 6th 1944, the Allied forces, constituted principally by the British, American and Canadian troops, landed in Normandy. This event, as communicated by the Resistance headquarters in Lyon, signaled the harassment of German troops by any means necessary. Rosenberg's guerrilla outfit, still stationed in the South of France, was transported near Valence. On August 15th, the Allies arrived on the Southeastern coastline of France, coercing the

Germans into the sacrifice of this front. Tasked with slowing the German movement north, with the American regiments playing catch-up in this region, Rosenberg was sent to an abandoned airport. The thoroughfare, facing the decrepit fuselages tossed haphazardly on the tarmac, was the German path to temporary safety; however, Rosenberg had no intention of allowing the enemy to regroup. At the helm of an outfit of twenty five, he set up roadblocks at every exit surrounding the airport, clogging the covert backroads, branching from the artery.

On August 23rd, at five in the morning, Rosenberg and his partner, who manned the machine gun as part of his operations in the previous guerrilla outfit, took shelter in a ditch closely watching the German units. The enemy, who turned the airport into a pathetic fortress, were burning all their documentation. The smoke from the building, emanating from the windows near the top of the North side, continued throughout the day. Rosenberg wondered whether the paper that was consigned to the flames took with it the last tangible memorials of victims.

“Allons-y”²² came the peremptory reply to a question that was never asked.

The trigger-happy Frenchman, of robust build, smacked young Rosenberg’s unsuspecting back. The Frenchman’s sinewy arms, always tense, were trembling in anticipation of a response. Rosenberg, aware that his comrade had lost a brother to the Germans, still ignorant of the manner of his death, shook his head, from left to right, repeating his disapproval of a maneuver motivated by vengeance and displaying an astonishing lack of discernment. Silence returned.

With his elbow thrust into the ribs of the starving Rosenberg, the hefty gunslinger exclaimed: “Est-ce que je les prends?”²³

²² Let’s go.

²³ Do I take them?

Eyes open, yet half-asleep, Rosenberg raised his head to look at the street. Three soldiers, walking side by side, entered his field of vision. “They do not look like German soldiers,” he thought to himself. With a decisive motion, raising his left arm to perform the stop signal with his hand, he deterred his partner from reaching for his sub-machine gun. He waited for the troops, who were inching closer towards their hideout, to provide him with a clearer sight of their insignias. Rosenberg felt for his pistol and the last grenade on his clip. He slowly bent his knees, his hand cocked mimicking the resting position of his revolver, and sprang out of the ditch in one sweeping leap. He pointed his weapon, with his finger on the trigger, aiming at the soldier in the middle of the wandering trio. Three pairs of constricted pupils with arms raised as if to shield themselves from imminent attack met Rosenberg, to his consternation.

“We are American, don’t shoot!” proclaimed the youngest of the three soldiers, evident from his fresh-faced visage.

Rosenberg was vigorous and incisive in his explanation, having picked up some English during his time in Paris, that they were foolish in their casual lack of preparedness, like somnambulists with eyes wide open. The Americans were quick to respond. As members of Task Force Butler, a reconnaissance company of the 636 Tank Destroyer Battalion, they had only recently arrived in the area.

The third soldier, plainly superior in rank, in a measured yet cordial manner, requested Rosenberg to accompany them to their headquarters in Montmarin, a small village. He agreed, immediately. As they walked around the bend of the road, he was shocked to find three unmanned armored vehicles. The Americans were doing reconnaissance on foot, an idea Rosenberg considered to be outrageously witless. Once in one of the trio of armored jeeps, journeying towards the Allied outposts, he discovered how little the Americans really knew.

As they arrived at the town square, a battalion of Sherman tanks was organized in four rows. Easy to produce and relatively inexpensive, these tanks were capable of withstanding an impressive amount of damage. Two armored cars split from the vehicle within which Rosenberg and the Statesman, as he was referred to by the lower-ranking American officers, were traveling.

“I am taking you to the Colonel. You will have to explain the situation to him. Is that clear?”

Rosenberg, curious to learn about the nature of the American strategy, paid no attention to his instinctive irritation with the order, made brusquely with self-proclaimed authority. The Colonel, a monolithic specimen, scrutinized the diminutive, and partially malnourished, frame of the guerilla fighter. Rosenberg’s face had a patchy stubble but his countenance, I imagine, was clear. The perspicacious reader of impressions, verbal or otherwise, having determined the contours of this language game, led with an unprompted monologue charting his escape from the clinic near Lyon. The Colonel was impressed. Within the next few moments, he asked, without warning:

“Are you French?” He continued to scrutinize the inscrutable facade, bewildered, like most others, by the absence of an accent and the indubitably Aryan features of this young man.

“Yes,” responded Rosenberg, careful to reveal only that which was asked for.

“You speak English!” wondered the Colonel, unable to contain a slight curve below his philtrum.

“English, French and German,” replied Rosenberg, carefully choosing those that would make him seem most favorable.

“You are ideal. You are now attached to the 636 Tank Destroyer Battalion as a guide and an interrogator.” This was an order, not a proposal.

“I cannot take command for you in this role,” said Rosenberg. He had not expected a position in the American ranks.

The Colonel, sensing the hesitation in his potential recruit, took a few calculated steps, bypassing the guerilla fighter, and opened a drawer in a tan colored cabinet. He revealed a telephone from which, with a series of deft flicks of his surprisingly nimble fingers, a voice answered on the other end of this call.

“I have found someone for 636. You will need to speak with him.”

Rosenberg was then handed the phone.

“My supervisor.” The Colonel looked directly into his eyes, with unflinching intensity.

That was the day the boy from Danzig, having learned patience and persistence from the guerillas, departed to become, as he would many years later, a translator, building bridges between languages.

As a guerrilla pursuing the German army, Rosenberg maintained scrupulous attention to detail. A reconnaissance army goes ahead of the armed forces, surveys the area and then confirms whether the route is safe. Although the ravaged and barren countryside was without many inhabitants, the few remaining people, either found dead in the fields or living in houses that endured the aerial bombardments, were the only witnesses to their own devastation.

*

He picked himself up from his chair. His right hand, a freeze-frame of curved talons moments before the capture of prey, searched for his reliable walking-stick, an array of which he kept in a grayish-beige receptacle with infrequently used umbrellas. A break in the continuity of our dialogues was unusual. He left the kitchen table and ambled aimlessly, first to a cushioned chair in his living room and then to his porch, overlooking the snow-topped Catskills undulating in the distance.

“War is a terrible thing” Professor Rosenberg said, as if this axiomatic truth required regular utterance in order to rejuvenate its fading veracity. Guy Ducornet, his intimate friend, in *Surréalisme et athéisme: à la niche les glapisseurs de dieu*, dedicated the book to the man standing in front of me, an unspeaking subject. Although Professor Rosenberg appreciated religion, as an organizing principle within communities and a socio-cultural force in history, his unshakeable skepticism in response to its modern perversions left him, he believed, no choice. He was a theologian, containing inter-faith dialogues that continued to burn despite the inextinguishable flame of belief, not in the practicing of faith, but in the study of it. This man chose the Enlightenment model of the mind as his path to understanding.

*

Reconnaissance was a social process. On August 28th, Rosenberg, along with a machine-gunner and two G.I's, slowed down near a farm-house. The hollowness of their stomachs, gurgling with periodic displeasure at the serial monotony of canned food, was a constant nuisance. France had been occupied for five years. Farmers survived. American soldiers on the front-line, who needed to eat regularly, were given K-rations. Each package included crackers, consumed at steady intervals in order to lengthen their 'shelf-life,' cans of milk, chocolate, spam, cheese and even toilet paper attached to soap, were all sometimes consumed simply to remind the body of digestion. The Americans were particularly irascible when it came to food; Rosenberg, having only been able to feed on his fantasized French meals, considered the K-rations both a luxury and a godsend. The worn-out door, chipped across the surface, with indentations, the cause of which remained unknown, was left ajar. An open door meant free passage or a trap.

Rosenberg, his gun loaded, remembering the lessons taught to him by the Underground Army in Lyon, pushed the door open with a gradual accretion of force.

“Je ne suis pas un collaborateur, monsieur!”²⁴ yelled an anguished voice.

“Ne t'inquiète pas. Pouvez-vous me dire où sont les Allemands?”²⁵ Rosenberg treated obtaining information as he did developing friendships, with empathy and unfailing discretion. A pair of eyes, scorched with burnt umber, surfaced above a long counter. A raised eyebrow preceded an observation: “Je ne savais pas que les Américains parlent français!”²⁶

²⁴ I am not a collaborator, sir!

²⁵ Do not worry. Can you tell me where are the Germans?

²⁶ I did not know Americans can speak French!

Rosenberg, clad in American *uniforme militaire*, realized the lack of congruence between the battalion in which he was now a member and the unaccented tongue that bridged the gap between trust and suspicion. The aged man, placated by the language of his nation, offered sustenance, not information for he had none. Rosenberg accepted a dozen eggs and fresh milk, which he distributed to the famished GI's. Their outward displays of frustration, when he returned from a conversation without information, were substituted with sheer delight in the presence of real food. They consumed the eggs raw and the milk lasted but a few minutes. Rosenberg returned to the entrance, a few steps away from the door to thank the generous man, who was not to be found. Instead, on the doorstep was a bottle with a long, thin neck. As the sunlight travelled through the glass, imbuing the liquid with a golden shine, Rosenberg quickly opened the bottle and realized that it was Calvados, an apple brandy. It was homemade, he thought, registering the smoothness as it trickled down his arid throat.

He returned to the armored Jeep. There was a driver behind the wheel, an empty passenger seat in which Rosenberg had been sitting, now occupied by the machine-gunner, and a radio operator stationed at the back. The jeep's rear had a raised, flat platform with space behind the machine-gun and radios for two people to stand. Rosenberg passed the information to the operator who would relay it to the base. The gunner smirked, pleased at having taken his seat at the front of the jeep. As Rosenberg approached the vehicle, a sudden thrust of the engine pushed it forward, beyond his reach. The Americans were laughing in unison, finding comic relief in these moments of levity, apparently sharing a nostalgic reminiscence of a childhood that Rosenberg had never known. Thus, instead of assuming his regular seat, he climbed into the back. The analgesic laughter seemed to transport the four men away from themselves, as the jeep

picked up speed. A defiant song emanated from a stray, vociferous rooster. Rosenberg remembered his father who would always choose to listen to Mozart when reading.

*

“Who are some of the other literary figures of the world who were able to excel in different genres? One was a German. The person who is considered to be the Shakespeare of Germany, the prototype of that nation, was Goethe. He wrote plays, one of which is very famous and is still being performed, Faust. That play gave rise to the term, Faustian. In other words, it is based on a bargain that a hero of this play made with the devil. What is the bargain? It is the very first scene in the play. It is fascinating as it deals with the period of Enlightenment. People are trying to find out how the world works. Dr. Faustus is a professor, which is very interesting. He sits in his study. He still doesn't know what the world is about, do you understand? I still do not know what it is all about but the devil has not come to see me as yet. They make a bargain and the devil will allow Faustus to experience everything in life. If at any time Faust says, this is the moment I want to last forever, that is when he loses his soul and the devil will claim it. The devil is going to expose us to sensuality. Faust becomes a political figure. He becomes well read. Let me give you an example. Without even understanding the language you can understand what the poetry is all about.”

Ich ging im Walde
So für mich hin,
Und nichts zu suchen,
Das war mein Sinn.

Im Schatten sah ich
Ein Blümchen stehn,
Wie Sterne leuchtend
Wie Äuglein schön.

Ich wollt es brechen,
Da sagt' es fein:
Soll ich zum Welken,
Gebrochen sein?

Ich grubs mit allen
Den Wurzeln aus,
Zum Garten trug ichs
Am hübschen Haus.

Und pflanzt es wieder
Am stillen Ort;
Nun zweigt es immer
Und blüht so fort.

Well, that's the poem.²⁷

²⁷ Found (1813)

Once in the forest
I strolled content,
To look for nothing
My sole intent.

I saw a flower,
Shaded and shy,
Shining like starlight,
Bright as an eye.

I went to pluck it;
Gently it said:
Must I be broken,
Wilt and be dead?

Then whole I dug it
Out of the loam

*

The shattering of this moment was inconceivable. Any weight beyond approximately two hundred pounds could activate the detonation of a Teller mine. The operator, near the radios, had jumped and rolled to safety during the explosion. The driver and the machine-gunner, who had been sitting in Rosenberg's seat, were dead.

The bottle of Calvados left his hand, cracking against the floor of the jeep. In mid-air, his eyes remained squeezed shut. On landing, he gasped for air. A sweet scent surrounded him. In this vineyard, in which he landed, the scarlet streams flowed down his cheeks, mixing with the crushed grapes. A piece of shrapnel, the cause of his head wound, rested a few feet from the puddles of his blood. The fall cracked five ribs, three of which were actually broken. Within minutes an ambulance arrived. Gloved hands moved across his head, dressing his wound. He strained his neck to look at the sympathetic faces. Their lips moved but he heard nothing. Sound is vibrations that travel. The auditory dimension of experience, which Rosenberg had hoped to understand one day, had just been taken from him, not by force alone but also by *malchance*.

And to my garden
Carried it home,

There to replant it
Where no wind blows.
More bright than ever
It blooms and grows.

Reflections of a Fledgling Biographer

Biographers reconstruct the lives of their subjects, living or dead, within the confines of a chronological architecture. The storyline is linear. The “cradle to grave” narrative, a common expression within the scholarly discourse on biography, is defined by the way biographical narrative conforms to the unfolding of time as it is experienced by every human being, beginning with birth and inevitably culminating in death.²⁸ History, a concept that, in terms of its multifarious definitions, remains contested, is nevertheless at the very least a description of the past.²⁹ As a consequence, the construction of historical narratives adheres to a linear form of retelling that mirrors temporality experienced outside the world of the text, tacitly imposing upon itself this chronological imperative as a dominant and parallel principle in biographical narrative.

Although there have been a few notable accounts illustrating the craft of life-writing, such as Leon Edel’s *Writing Lives: Principia Biographica* and the contemporary, succinct *How to do Biography*, a primer by Nigel Hamilton, the conspicuous absence of a sustained theoretical discourse on life-writing, a term that arose during the twentieth century, is lamentable. Biography, as a genre, has insufficiently engaged with the principles of composition upon which it is based, which is striking since it is undergirded by both history and literature, the intersection of which also remains a highly contested theoretical space for dialogue and debate.³⁰

The practice of writing biography, which shares similarities with the composition of historical narratives, involves the use of literary techniques; however, the crucial facet of the

²⁸ Nigel Hamilton, *Biography: A Brief History*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 14-18.

²⁹ Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1984), 31-44.

This account records and puts into dialogue the polyvalence of voices in relation to conceptions of history and fiction.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

aforementioned recognition, often overlooked or negated by scholars within the field, is that biographical narratives are also subject to aesthetic requirements in both style and structure.

Narrative, shared by fictional and historical writing, is the fulcrum around which we can aim to better understand the craft of narrative composition in biography - a “hybrid genre that is grounded in history” but shares many characteristics with fiction.³¹ Considering the paucity of programs that teach the craft of life-writing, with the exception of established programs in East Anglia and Hawaii, this paper, with the case of time in storytelling as seen in the biography of Justus Rosenberg, will explain the ossification of biography, in terms of its aesthetic development. In addition, this paper will illustrate the manner in which time, if employed in an imaginative way, can fruitfully, and urgently, contribute to the narrative composition of a biographer’s subject.

Hayden White, a prominent theorist of narrative discourse and historical representation, asks a question that occasions a critical outlook on the role of the imagination in the composition of historical writing: “How else can any past be represented in either consciousness or discourse except in an ‘imaginary’ way?”³²

Certain scholars consider such a view to be inordinately focused upon the “aesthetic imagination” within a discussion of historical writing that has always been understood as a linear narrative.³³ Biographies attempting to erode this ossified chronological imperative within the genre are elusive. The most prominently documented case of an *experimental work*, a term that makes explicit a deviation from the “cradle to grave” narrative, is A.J.A Symon’s *Quest for Corvo*, published almost a century ago. The lack of modern equivalents, or offshoots, after

³¹ Michael Benton, “Towards a Poetics of Literary Biography,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 45 (no. 3) 2011, 67-87.

³² Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987), 26.

³³ Richard Evans, *In Defense of History*. (American ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 65-89.

Symon's narrative, structured as a detective story in which the protagonist follows his biographical subject mirroring a mystery novel, illustrates two conditions of biography as a genre today: the persisting inertia facing various biographers who continuously reproduce lives with identical chronologies and banal narrative compositions; and, as a consequence, the desperate need for the resuscitation of this genre with riveting premises involving the biographer as sleuth, investigating a fictional world of witnesses and suspects in order to better understand her real subject, for example.³⁴

Michael Benton, in *Towards a Poetics of Literary Biography*, explains the biographer's role with an emphasis on temporality:

What histories and biographies share with novels is their temporal organization; but whereas the novelist constructs a narrative of imagined events, the biographer and historian aim to reconstruct a narrative from real-life past events.³⁵

Benton, in a move that reveals the entrenched congruence between history and biography, observed by scholars and practitioners of life-writing such as Hermione Lee and Richard Holmes, treats their common 'aim' as fundamentally *reconstructive*.³⁶ In contrast, the novelist, unconstrained by "real-life events," wields the imagination with unbridled autonomy.³⁷ The metaphor of building narratives, employed in this instance and frequently encountered in the discourse surrounding this question, imports the notion that biographers, through reconstruction, are tasked with the *rearrangement* of the building blocks of the narratives, which Benton defines as the "scenes and events" of a story. A novelist, whose building blocks emerge from an unfettered imagination, is a *creator* of narrative. In contrast, when we look at time, in

³⁴ A. J. A Symons, *The Quest for Corvo*. (New York: New York Review, 2001).

³⁵ Benton, 71.

³⁶ Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6-8.

³⁷ Richard Holmes, "Proper Use" in *Mapping Lives* (London: University Press, 2014), 10-11.

biographical narrative, the nature of this *rearrangement* of the parts of a narrative manifests itself:

In 1921, Justus Rosenberg was born in the Free City of Danzig, which remained a bone of contention between Germany and Poland as it was located at the entrance of the Baltic Sea. He grew up near Weidengasse, on a relatively quiet side street. The Rosenbergs, who lived in a four storey building, occupied the top floor. The family that lived below them consisted of a widow, whose husband had been a government official, and two sons, Karl and Justus. Young Rosenberg was always invited to their home during Christmas. The Germans were Protestants and never failed to celebrate this holiday. After adorning the Christmas tree with candles and exchanging presents, they always sang songs together. Rosenberg's mother, still looking for a name, decided to call him Justus, the righteous one, a Latin name that appeared once in the New Testament.³⁸

If we were to, in line with the metaphor of building, *deconstruct*, this narrative into its constituent building blocks, it would reveal the biographer's task, as implied by Benton, predominantly as a form of *rearrangement*. The author, in the first clause, provides Rosenberg's birthplace and time, a qualifier explaining a historical fact about the city in which he was born and the underlying cause for this geopolitical tension. The next sentence builds upon the foundation of the scene with an accretion of details including the street near which Rosenberg lived, a description of his family's household and an explanation for the manner in which he was given his name. Time often flows in a linear manner as the biographer pulls the reader from the past into a future that unfolds by the process of reading itself.

In this instance, as in most biographies controlled by the chronological imperative, the biographer returns to the beginning of the subject's life in order to compose a narrative that moves forward through events unknown to the subject, in the biography, but known to the biographer. By writing "back to the future," biographies preserve their allegiance to the linear

³⁸ This is an excerpt from an earlier draft of the biography of Justus Rosenberg, written during the Fall in 2016.

chronology that characterizes biographical narrative; however, it is noteworthy that the act of deploying facts within a narrative allows for biographical *rearrangement* to disrupt the linearity of a narrative. If I had the information about, for example, the children Professor Rosenberg played football with or the first Christmas present he had received, then I could have engaged with temporality by choosing to employ, defer, store or discard facts in the composition of the narrative; nevertheless, linearity is easy to understand and often prioritized in biographical writing, prompting biographers to treat temporality as it had unfolded in the life of the subject rather than employ it, actively, as a sculpting tool available to the biographer.

The biographer is limited, as compared to the novelist, in terms of temporal design. The cradle to grave narrative, charting a biographical subject in accordance with a linear order of events, with conventional markers of time as seen by chapters or phases of a life, delimits the scope for a biographer's role that transcends *rearrangement* of the building blocks of narrative.

The reversal of time that Ackroyd experiments with, for example, in his biography of Dickens, by beginning from his subject's death, could not erase the overarching linearity embedded in the story.³⁹ With a subject like Shakespeare, the dearth of biographical facts has prompted temporal experimentation including biographies that have expanded beyond the chronological limits of the subject's life. For example, Bate in his biography of the playwright includes a "pre-life" and "post-life" of the subject in order to capture the influences and implications of his art outside of the life "he lived."⁴⁰ Such examples of life-writing, attempting to unshackle itself from the overbearing nature of a linear chronology, furnish a profoundly straightforward lesson in narrative composition and temporality: the development of narrative strategies within biography, borrowing from modes customarily reserved for the novelist, serves

³⁹ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1990).

⁴⁰ Jonathan, Bate. *The Genius of Shakespeare*. (10th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

to bring the biographer closer to a realization of the *creative potential* that inheres in the writing of biographical narrative.

As the authorised biographer of Justus Rosenberg, a courier in Varian Fry's Emergency Rescue Committee, who facilitated the escape of émigrés from Vichy France, I experimented with a form of narrative composition that interposed his classroom dialogues, as he taught twentieth century novels, with his life during the French Resistance.

As a teaching assistant for Professor Rosenberg's classes, I integrated biographical research, by recording his classes, with the edifying experience that involved close reading French, Russian and German novels, and listening to several students' discussions with him involving analyses of literary texts, biographical or otherwise. This activity engendered engrossing dialogues with Professor Rosenberg which further illustrated both the finer details of his life story and his approach to teaching literature. Consequently, in my storytelling mode, which emerged from this dialogic interplay between my subject as a member of the Resistance and a Professor of languages and literature, I hoped to productively deviate from the acts of biographical cannibalism that not only reproduce works on well-trodden lives but also pastiches the form of their previous biographers.

By placing sections of his classroom discussions within the chronologically linear narrative of his life-story, I was aware that the reader would have to experience the temporal disjunction that disrupted the flow of time within the text. The hybridity of biography, as a genre constituted by fictional techniques, in terms of its building blocks, and historical data, due to the reliance on facts, was employed to imbue the narrative with pauses, between temporally disconnected sections, engendering a recognition of this shift within the reader. Consequently, the scenes of the narrative, as I have presented them, create an interpretive space for the reader,

who experiences both the linear chronology of young Rosenberg as a guerrilla fighter as well as the lectures of Professor Rosenberg, the scholar in his mid-nineties.

These parallel lives are presented as discrete constituents of the narrative; however, by forming connections between the parts of these separate, yet inextricably linked narratives, the biographer and, in turn, the reader will compose their own rendering of the biographical subject. Similarly, the composition of the biographical narrative, in this case, has loosened the restraints of the chronological straitjacket, transforming the biographer's task from *rearrangement* to a form of *creative reconstruction* through this assemblage of the interlaced elements of the narrative.

Scenes and stories are significant constituents in our composition of biographical narratives, detailing the histories of our subjects. These elements of a narrative themselves have an imagined nature, having been inherited by the biographer through interviews or written documents. The unformed vagaries of memory include, and often lose the grasp of, pieces of verbal information, nebulous and often ill-considered first impressions, spontaneous embellishments, the insatiable desire to fill all the narrative lacunae — all of which the biographer must imbibe, organize, rearrange and creatively assemble into a life story through the composition of narrative in time. As a biographer, thinking of the task as distinctly historical or novelistic, is constraining as compared to the realization that narration is shared by both modes. Returning to White, we see, as he presciently observed, that far from being antithetical to historical narrative, “fictional narrative is its complement and ally in the universal human effort to reflect in the mystery of temporality.”⁴¹ This reflection, for the biographer, proves fruitful in

⁴¹ White, 94.

the writing of biographical narrative as a distinctly *creative* act, for it is an art, “not a mere recording of facts.”⁴²

⁴² Lee, 44.

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